what can now be seen as a trilogy of social commentaries on urban life and violence in Brazil. Whereas Bus 174 analysed the tragic trajectory of Sandro do Nascimento from his life as a street child in Rio de Janeiro, during which he witnessed the Candelária massacre, to his taking a public bus hostage, the Elite Squad films confront the police and politics head on.

With Elite Squad: The Enemy Within, Padilha has added to an already impressive line of films with a social conscience. It struck a strong chord with the Brazilian public when on its release in 2010 it became the highest grossing film of all time in Brazil attracting some 11 million viewers. On one hand it can be seen as purely a slick action thriller but the social message it delivers is impossible to ignore. The film received an all too brief run in UK cinemas last year but has now been released on DVD.

Ostensibly a sequel to the 2007 polemic against police brutality that was Elite Squad, this follow-up to the original film is a much more nuanced piece of work. The comparisons some have made between this film and David Simon’s The Wire are not entirely unjustified as the plot weaves its way through the police, local politicians and the press.

Wagner Moura gives a blistering performance as Lieutenant Colonel Roberto Nascimento who has risen...
The plague of paramilitaries

FILM: Impunity
Directors: Juan José Lozano and Hollman Morris
Intermezzo Films 2010

Impunity is a powerful documentary of one of the most horrific periods of human rights abuses and atrocities in recent times; the rise of the right-wing United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AUC) paramilitaries. The subject matter of this film ensured it would always be shocking. The sheer scale and horror of the crimes committed by the AUC against ordinary, innocent people are hard to believe. However, possibly the most awful aspect of the story – encapsulated in the film’s poster, showing a stylised picture of a businessman dressed in a suit with a briefcase hanging from one arm while the other arm sports an AUC armband and carries an assault rifle – is the collusion and even overt support that politicians and big business gave to the militias.

The appalling crimes committed by the AUC speak for themselves. This enables Lozano and Morris to be able to tell this story with little direct input. First-hand testimonies from the families of victims tell of the murders, kidnappings and disappearances that took place. The scene is set vividly by the opening sequence of the film where a woman tearfully tells of how her 12-year-old brother, whilst out playing with friends, was set upon by a group of paramilitaries and decapitated.

Much of the film follows the work of the Justice and Peace Tribunal; a body with quasi-criminal jurisdiction set up by the Colombian government in 2005 with the remit of investigating the atrocities committed by the paramilitaries and providing justice and reparation to the AUC’s victims and their families. Unfortunately the reality has fallen well short of that.

By 2010, of the 48,000 reported disappearances linked to the AUC, only 973 families of victims had recovered their remains. Although family members are allowed to question paramilitary commanders at tribunal hearings as to the fate of their loved ones, the film shows that time after time these questions are unanswered. Reparation has clearly been shortcoming. As for justice, of the thousands of former paramilitaries that were reviewed by the tribunal, only two partial criminal sentences have been handed down. Thousands of paramilitaries were released straight away only to be later arrested for committing further atrocities.

One achievement of the tribunal was to shed some light on the level of political and corporate involvement with the AUC. Paramilitary commanders admitted to ensuring the election of particular governors and senators through voter intimidation, and violently suppressing strikes on behalf of banana industry tycoons. However, as allegations arose against more and more politicians, President Uribe decided to extradite the paramilitary commanders who were making these allegations to the USA on drugs charges, removing them from the country and destroying any chance of the Justice and Peace Tribunal uncovering the true scale of political involvement.

It is clear from the title that this film is not a light-hearted account. As the film ends it outlines that paramilitary groups continue to plague vast areas of Colombia, despite the official position that they were demobilised in 2002, and almost none have been held to account. For the majority of paramilitaries and their State and corporate accomplices within Colombia, impunity persists.

Michael Goold